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How Can the Military Best Support Guard and Reserve Families During Deployment?

Since the first Gulf War, the Department of Defense (DoD) has increasingly used the National Guard and Reserves. This reliance, which includes more frequent activation and overseas deployments, may put enormous strain on reserve component (RC) families. Existing research on how deployments affect military families has focused almost exclusively on the active component (AC). But demographic differences between AC and RC families suggest that the latter may face different issues during deployment and, thus, require different support. Further, because RC families are more geographically dispersed, many are distant from military family resources.

This study examined RC families' experiences during activation and deployment, explored their use of family support resources, and assessed how their experiences may influence retention intentions. It focused on the families of enlisted personnel and officers serving in the Army Reserve, Army National Guard, Air Force Reserve, and Marine Forces Reserve. The study features interviews with a spouse or a service member from 653 families that have experienced at least one overseas deployment since September 2001.

What Are RC Families' Deployment Experiences?

When service members and spouses were asked to assess how ready they felt their family was for the most recent deployment, 65 percent of service members and 60 percent of spouses indicated that their family was ready or very ready. However, how they defined family readiness varied. Overall, three types of family readiness were each cited by approximately two-fifths of interviewees—financial readiness, readiness related to household responsibilities, and emotional or mental readiness.

Abstract

Analysis of reserve component (RC) families' deployment experiences—those of service members and spouses—shows that most families feel they are ready or very ready for deployment and have coped well with it. However, most also experienced both problems and positive aspects that have an impact on their retention intentions and, potentially, their military effectiveness. Family support efforts should be assessed in terms of family readiness, family coping, and retention intentions—measures of military manpower and family-related outcomes that can guide long-term management of RC personnel.

It is important to understand how well families cope with deployment. This study found that, like readiness, coping meant different things to different families. Further, a sizable minority—37 percent of service members and 29 percent of spouses—could not provide any definition of coping. Those who did offer a definition tended to discuss coping in terms of dealing with emotions or handling household responsibilities. Despite the absence of a consistent definition, the majority (63 percent of service members and 62 percent of spouses) said their family coped well or very well.

As for problems stemming from deployment, 79 percent of families had some type of deployment-related challenge, but the kinds of problems and the types of families associated with each problem varied a great deal. Emotional or mental problems (39 percent of spouses and 26 percent of service members) and problems with household responsibilities (40 percent of spouses

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Suggestions for Improvement

Activation and Deployment Personnel Practices
Ensure that any notice sufficient for service members and families to prepare for deployment is also sufficient for the military
Pursue predictable mobilizations of limited average length
Reduce the use of cross-leveling (separating RC personnel from the units they traditionally drill with)
Perceptions and Expectations
Ensure that family expectations are consistent with DoD's vision of an RC that is both operational and strategic
Recognize that family perceptions are sometimes more important than actual experiences
Recognize that families focus on "boots away from home," not "boots on the ground"
Emphasize the positive aspects of activation and deployment
Support and Information for Families
Increase the level of readiness among not-yet-activated families
Tailor efforts to avoid and mitigate deployment-related problems
Recognize that severity and consequences of problems vary
Seek ways to make deployment-phased and "on demand" information available to families
Know how to find families
Explore ways to connect families to one another
Support and partner with local and community resources for families and seek ways to make families more aware of those resources
Bear in mind the limited capacity and capabilities of military or nonmilitary volunteer-based resources
Reinforce and learn from families who seem to proceed through the deployment cycle with fewer problems

and 20 percent of service members) were mentioned most frequently. Emotional and mental problems ranged in severity from relatively mild sadness and anxiety to more severe emotional or mental difficulties requiring medical attention. Problems of this nature were cited more frequently by younger spouses and by those more recently married, whereas older spouses in more established marriages were more likely to discuss household issues. Other commonly mentioned problems were related to issues of employment and children. Also, 29 percent of service members (albeit only 14 percent of spouses) reported that their family had experienced no problems from deployment.

Yet most RC families also reported positive aspects of deployment, including increased family closeness (29 percent of spouses and 20 percent of service members) or a combination of patriotism, pride, and civic responsibility (24 and 15 percent, respectively). Additionally, 26 percent of service members and 20 percent of spouses cited financial benefits, and 20 percent of spouses noted that the experience increased their self-confidence and made them more self-sufficient. However, 20 percent of service members and 13 percent of spouses reported experiencing no positive aspects.

Most families used some type of resource during their most recent deployment. The most frequently cited military resources included TRICARE and family support organizations (e.g., family readiness groups, Key Volunteer Network). Among the informal resources, extended family, religious

organizations, and friends and neighbors were mentioned most often. Across both military and informal resources, only extended family was cited by a majority of interviewees (among the spouses) as a resource used.

What Impact Do Deployment Experiences Have on Retention Intentions?

Researchers found that family readiness, many of the problems and positive aspects, and family coping all had implications for retention and, consequently, for military effectiveness. Specifically, those who described their family as ready or very ready for the deployment and those who believed their family coped well or very well tended to have a preference for staying. The same was true for those who mentioned one of the major positive aspects of deployment: financial gain, increased family closeness, or patriotism and pride. Conversely, many of the most frequently mentioned problems had negative implications for retention. Those who cited problems related to emotional or mental health, employment, education, marital issues, or health care all were more likely to express a preference for leaving.

What Should the Military Do to Support RC Families?

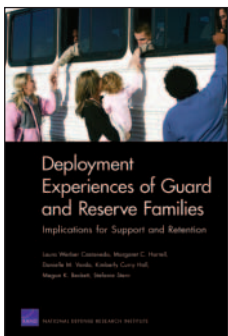
Given the above findings on deployment experiences, the study offers a series of actions that could be taken to support RC families in three areas, as shown in the table.

Conclusions

Policymakers and those who support RC families must understand both the problems and the positive aspects of deployment. First, DoD has committed to ensuring and promoting general family well-being as part of a “new social compact” that recognizes the tremendous sacrifice of military families. Second, DoD views family readiness not only as critical to mission success but also as a quality-of-life issue inseparable from overall combat readiness. Finally, the analysis indicates a relationship between the problems and positive

aspects of families and military outcomes, including readiness and retention intentions, that may affect DoD’s ability to satisfy its military mission.

While many of the problems and the positive aspects merit short-term attention and the allocation of support resources, the findings suggest that family support effectiveness should be assessed in terms of family readiness, family coping, and retention intentions—measures of military manpower and family-related outcomes that can guide long-term management of RC personnel. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Deployment Experiences of Guard and Reserve Families: Implications for Support and Retention*, by Laura Werber Castaneda, Margaret C. Harrell, Danielle M. Varda, Kimberly Curry Hall, Megan K. Beckett, and Stefanie Stern, MG-645-OSD, 2009, 368 pp., \$45.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4573-7 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG645>). This research brief was written by Paul Steinberg. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND®** is a registered trademark.

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